

# Inside Belarusian Prisons

The Lukashenka regime often uses politically motivated administrative detentions for up to 15 days to fight against civil society and the opposition in Belarus.

In 2011 the author of this article organised the action of solidarity with two activists – Zmitser Dashkevich and Edward Lobau – during their trial near the courthouse. Unsurprisingly, Belarusian police officers arrested the author.

The next day under judge Matyl in the same courthouse punishment followed – 10 days of administrative arrest. This article lifts the veil on what hides behind the bars and shows the conditions which Belarusian activists undergo in detention. This article describes one particular detention centre located in Akrestsina Street in Minsk for three reasons.

First, most Belarusian civil activists are usually kept there. Second, the conditions in the centre can be regarded as average for Belarus. Conditions vary in every city and within each city. Some can even provide detainees with relatively clean linen, in others detainees will be sleeping on wooden shelves and use a bucket as a toilet. Finally, the author served his administrative arrest.

## **Akrestsina Detention Centre Welcomes You**

Standard cells in the Akrestsina facility are approximately 15 square metres, usually for five to six people. There also have a toilet and a sink in the cell (political activists often joke that the whole cell is actually a large closet). So each person has about two square metres of space.

Such high density is possible due to the fact that prisoners

sleep together on a "stage" – the so-called improvised wooden bed that takes up most of the camera. Naturally, there is not enough space on the stage for everyone, so the residents have to sleep very tight. Quite often, people sleep so tightly that if one person on the "stage" wants to turn over, all the others have to turn over all together.

Heating and ventilation is such that it is cold in the cells in winter and hot in summer. In some cells, it is impossible to open the window, so in summer the temperature exceeds the limit. It is difficult to provide exact numbers as there are no thermometers in the cells, and the police do not give accurate information. People arrested for the first time always remember the toilet, which is just a hole in the floor.

Prisoners do not have watches, although "experienced" people can tell approximate time by the daily routine (wake up, breakfast, lunch, dinner) and by planes flying over Minsk. Generally, direct communication with the outside world is impossible – all electronic devices are taken away.

Prisoners can write letters using ordinary envelopes but police officers read letters and often do not send them to the addressees. Further, every seven days, a prisoner has a right to take a shower.

Apart from civil activists, most people who are detained there are petty thieves, drug addicts or homeless. From time to time, the police "throw" political activists into the cells with sick people on purpose.

Administrative detentions are especially hard to bear for women who are afraid of rats. Rats feel as calm as humans in the Akrestsina cells, they even move quite slowly.

### **Struggle For Human Conditions**

Naturally, everything described above violates international standards, as well as Belarusian legislation. Political

activists have long been struggling for better confinement conditions in the centre for isolation of law-breakers. Ivan Shyla, the Vice-Chairman of the Young Front youth political group, who served administrative detention in Akrestsina several times, says:

*The struggle between the activists and the centre for isolation of offenders started long ago. I joined it only in 2010, when I got there for the first time. Frankly speaking, I could not imagine that the confinement conditions could be so poor before – low temperature, absence of any beds, let alone bed linen. On the whole, the cells are specially designed to humiliate a person's dignity. In fact, there is nothing to do in Akrestsina. For example, there are a lot of people who are keen on reading, but it is impossible to read because there's not enough light. Also, it is a shame that there's no proper medical care. During the arrest, my allergy got worse and my skin literally started rotting.*

After his release, Ivan Shyla filed numerous complaints and they gave the following result – the Republican Sanitary Epidemiological Station of the Interior Ministry conducted an inspection in the Akrestsina Street detention centre, and considered it inappropriate for serving administrative detentions.

Political activists were surprised by the inspection's results, as usually it is not accepted in our country to admit that there are human rights violations. In the end, the detention centre administration promised to repair the building. But many are quite sceptical about it. Not only because administrative detentions in Belarus are aimed at humiliation and loss of dignity of democratic activists, but also because there's not enough money in the state budget.

Families, colleagues and ordinary people always come to meet freshly released civil activists under the prison walls.

However, sometimes it is impossible. For the last several years there is a very popular practise in Akrestsina – to drive the newly released prisoners to the industrial areas of the city and throw them out of the car there. Usually, activists call a taxi and go back to the detention centre to meet with the people who came to express their solidarity.

In neighbouring Lithuania the former KGB building houses a museum, where anyone can come and see how cells looked in the days of the Soviet Union. People who have personally visited this museum said that conditions in Belarus since then have improved, but not significantly. For the time being, Belarusian prison is a place to humiliate people. This is particularly noticeable when people are detained for their democratic views.

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